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STATE FOR NEA/MAG (HOPKINS/HARRIS); DRL (JOHNSTONE/KLARMAN)
LONDON AND PARIS FOR NEA WATCHER

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: OPPOSITION LEADER DECLARES CANDIDACY FOR PRESIDENT

REF: A. 07 TUNIS 01283

[B](#). 07 TUNIS 01248
[C](#). 07 TUNIS 1404

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#). (SBU) In a February 13 press conference, the opposition Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) announced its former Secretary General Nejib Chebbi would be the party's candidate

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for president for the 2009 presidential elections. Chebbi's candidacy was supported by a number of prominent independent activists who also attended the press conference. Tunisia's current electoral law virtually rules out the possibility that Chebbi will be able to run, but PDP Secretary General Maya Jribi called on the government to modify electoral laws to allow the candidacy. One time "exceptional" laws regarding candidacy are normally issued by the president a few months prior to elections. The PDP political bureau issued a statement advocating that, in order to promote free and fair elections, such laws should be propagated as soon as possible. End Summary.

[2](#). (C) On February 13, the opposition Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) officially announced that its former Secretary General Nejib Chebbi would be the party's candidate

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for the 2009 presidential elections. Though many groups have called for incumbent President Ben Ali to run in 2009, Chebbi is the first to officially announce his candidacy. PDP Secretary General Maya Jribi made the announcement while

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simultaneously calling for a broad range of political reforms. Despite boycotting the 2004 legislative elections, Jribi also announced the PDP's intention to put forward a slate of parliamentary candidates in 2009. In her press statement, Jribi advocated greater liberties for NGOs (ref A), freeing political prisoners, increasing freedom of the press, and electoral reform. Jribi opined that electoral reform in particular is necessary to promote free and fair elections and combat voter apathy. Similarly, increased freedom of expression would help with the upcoming 2009 elections' transparency. She characterized the existing electoral system as one that condescendingly allocates Parliamentary seat quotas to opposition parties rather than fostering true competition.

13. (C) Rumors of Chebbi's candidacy have been circulating for several weeks. Press reports, and items circulating on the internet hinted at internal party discord about it. When the press asked Chebbi about the uniformity of his party's backing, he responded that while there was some dissent, the process was democratic and a majority approved the candidacy.

He also clarified that the October 18th movement (an alliance of disparate human rights and political activists that includes moderate Islamists), of which Chebbi is also a member, does not support any particular candidate. He said that movement advocates anti-corruption measures, freedom expression and association, free and fair elections, and the release of political prisoners. It has no plans to endorse politicians, although politicians are members.

Throwing Down the Gauntlet

14. (C) Chebbi's press statement focused on the need for free and fair elections and asked that the 2009 elections not be a repeat of the 2004 elections, which several civil society groups have described as procedurally flawed. Despite GOT propaganda, Chebbi said, Tunisia faces a growing problem of unemployment, especially among college graduates. He also denounced the uneven distribution of resources between regions of the country. He argued that GOT policies had diminished Tunisians' ability to compete in the global market, and promised that he would promote both political openness and economic growth. Chebbi's speech also noted the government has a responsibility to provide better health care, increased infrastructure, and increased economic growth.

15. (C) The best way to accomplish economic growth and stability, Chebbi argued, was with political openness, which would give people a stake in their future. Chebbi stated increased political participation would create more stability, not less. He called on the government to modify the law to allow independents to run, rather than restricting participation only to hand-picked candidates. The PDP would push to hold meetings, campaign, and present the party platform, whether his candidacy was allowed, and that his candidacy's legality would not affect the PDP's legislative campaign efforts. When asked if his candidacy would be difficult for the GOT to accept, Chebbi answered that he felt the population has a right to plurality and free and fair elections. Whether the PDP achieves its objectives, it would still have contributed to positive change.

Current Law an Obstacle

16. (C) Current law virtually rules out the possibility of a Chebbi candidacy at this time, as it requires that each presidential candidate garner the support of 30 members of parliament or local mayors. Since these politicians are all affiliated with either the ruling or loyal opposition parties, and there are no PDP-affiliated mayors or members of parliament, Chebbi is unlikely to receive such an endorsement. Jribi called on the government to modify electoral laws to allow Chebbi to run. One time "exceptional" laws regarding candidacy are normally issued by the president a few months prior to elections, but the PDP's political bureau issued a statement advocating that such a law be propagated as soon as possible to foster free and fair elections. The PDP has previously suggested that the Portuguese model of accumulating the signatures of a certain percentage of the population be used as an alternate means of validating candidates.

17. (C) The PDP press conference also included comments from a dozen prominent independent activists. Their spokesman, Khemais Chemmari, noted that independents supported the right of every willing candidate to run for elected office, and it was in this context that they advocated modification of the electoral laws. Chemmari said Tunisians deserve a choice,

and that the elections was an opportunity for them to express their political will. He characterized present electoral laws as handicapping Tunisia's advancement by disallowing candidates. After Chemmari, attorney Ayachi Hammami (see Ref B) spoke in support of Chebbi. Also present were attorney Mohamed Abbou, journalist Lotfi Hajji, and members of the opposition Et-tajdid party.

Comment

18. (C) By declaring his candidacy, Chebbi and the PDP have thrown down a gauntlet before the GOT. Failing to clarify electoral law early or to allow Chebbi's candidacy would discredit the 2009 elections, but allowing Chebbi to run would provide the PDP a platform the GOT has hereto been unwilling to provide (Ref C). Chebbi's entire platform is built on reforms the GOT has been slow (or unwilling) to embrace. The international community is likely to follow Chebbi's candidacy closely; his treatment will be an indicator of the GOT's willingness to pursue meaningful political reform. To that end, a number of embassies (including the French, British, Germans, Americans, and the European Union) sent representatives to the press conference.

End Comment.
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